

So Many Cranes In So Little Time

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Hartford, at last, is getting hot.

The Courant began its Cranes & Scaffolds feature on Sept. 13, 1998, shortly after then-Gov. John G. Rowland laid out his vision for downtown's Six Pillars of Progress. The idea behind the editorial report card was to track major projects in the core of the capital city, from housing to parking to commercial enterprises, in order to spur its hoped-for renaissance.

At that time, skeptics outnumbered believers. Construction cranes were as rare a sight on the Hartford skyline as whooping cranes. Today, they are a familiar part of the landscape.

Call us cockeyed optimists, but it seems as if the capital city has reached that flashpoint where perception meets reality and progress takes on momentum of its own.

Of the 19 projects receiving attention in today's report, 16 are accompanied by the symbols of a running man or a rocket, meaning those projects are moving along at a reasonable clip or rocketing toward completion. For the first time ever, none of the projects has been assigned the dreaded stalled car. Significantly, the centerpiece of downtown development, the Connecticut Convention Center and hotel, at the state-subsidized development called Adriaen's Landing, retires after today from this feature. Stamp it "complete."

That doesn't mean Adriaen's Landing can yet be declared a success. Front Street, the all-important retail, residential and entertainment component across Columbus Boulevard from the convention center, has had a slow start and a checkered history. Its development is still being negotiated. But it's useful to remember that in 1998, a football stadium was still on the drawing board for that vicinity. In hindsight, that would have been a huge mistake.

When Cranes & Scaffolds was first published seven years ago, the Civic Center, called "a monument to frustration" by The Courant back then, still lacked a buyer. The UConn stadium at Rentschler Field didn't exist. Housing downtown was practically nonexistent. The science center was in the doldrums. The Colt building was falling apart, its blue onion dome peeling and decrepit.

The gleaming Learning Corridor near Trinity College was a vacant lot. The Belding Theater at the Bushnell was but a sparkle in the arts community's eye. Capital Community College, which is already looking to expand its new home in the renovated G. Fox building, was at the time still trying to decide on a site. All these projects and

more have been realized or are on their way toward fulfillment. Each quarter, new plans appear at a rate that seems to be accelerating. Parking, never in satisfactory supply, is popping up like dandelions in April.

You get the picture. Hartford's dreams are coming together. Longed-for sounds of construction are now street music to pedestrians and patrons in the crowded cafes. It's beginning to feel like a real metropolis. That feeling should intensify as more people take up residence downtown.

Trumbull Centre has model apartments ready to entice tenants and retail ready to go. Hartford 21, the apartment tower at the Civic Center, is rising like a, well, rocket. The SNET apartment building is lived-in and loved. The Metropolitan on Pearl Street is being converted to condominiums without public subsidy. High-end condos are in the works down the block.

Even some of the hoarier projects listed from the beginning in Cranes & Scaffolds have momentum. The Center for Science and Exploration, viewed as comatose not long ago, has a director, a design and a date for a ground-breaking. The beautiful building at 410 Asylum hasn't progressed at all, but count that as a blessing: It was doomed to be razed for parking. Thanks to some nice negotiating by Mayor Eddie Perez and the property owner, the building is slated to become park-side apartments.

The buzz about downtown's new look is a healthy sign of growing vitality. Although Hartford's star still has plenty of room to rise, the patient appears to be headed for full recovery.

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